

Assembly Bill No. 131

CHAPTER 413

An act to amend Sections 903.1 and 903.45 of, and to add Section 903.47 to, the Welfare and Institutions Code, relating to juvenile court costs.

[Approved by Governor October 11, 2009. Filed with
Secretary of State October 11, 2009.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 131, Evans. Juvenile proceedings: costs.

Existing law provides for the appointment of counsel to represent a parent or guardian of a child, or the child, in juvenile court proceedings if the parent or guardian is unable to afford counsel. Existing law also provides that the father, mother, spouse, or other person liable for the support of the minor shall be liable to the county for those costs, except as specified, and, more generally, for specified other costs, including the reasonable costs of support of the minor while the minor is placed in, detained in, or committed to, any institution pursuant to an order of the juvenile court or pursuant to the authority of a peace officer to take a minor into temporary custody.

Existing law authorizes the board of supervisors to designate a county financial evaluation officer to make financial evaluations of liability for reimbursement of the costs described above, as specified, and authorizes that officer to petition the court for an order requiring the person who is determined to be financially responsible to pay the costs.

This bill would expand the provisions described above to specifically provide that the persons who are liable for the support of the minor shall also be liable for the cost to the county or the court for the cost of legal services rendered to the minor, except under specified circumstances. The bill would specify that the fees collected pursuant to this provision be deposited in the Trial Court Trust Fund.

The bill would require the Judicial Council to establish a cost recovery program, including a specified statewide standard for determining the ability to pay, to collect reimbursements for the costs of counsel appointed by the court to represent parents or minors, as specified. The bill would also authorize the court, with the consent of the county and pursuant to the terms and conditions agreed upon by the court and the county, to designate a financial evaluation officer to make financial evaluations of liability for reimbursement pursuant to the provision governing liability for the cost to the county or the court of legal services rendered to the minor. The bill would also make related and technical changes.

The people of the State of California do enact as follows:

SECTION 1. Section 903.1 of the Welfare and Institutions Code is amended to read:

903.1. (a) The father, mother, spouse, or other person liable for the support of a minor, the estate of that person, and the estate of the minor, shall be liable for the cost to the county or the court, whichever entity incurred the expenses, of legal services rendered to the minor by an attorney pursuant to an order of the juvenile court. The father, mother, spouse, or other person liable for the support of a minor and the estate of that person shall also be liable for any cost to the county or the court of legal services rendered directly to the father, mother, or spouse, of the minor or any other person liable for the support of the minor, in a dependency proceeding by an attorney appointed pursuant to an order of the juvenile court. The liability of those persons (in this article called relatives) and estates shall be a joint and several liability.

(b) Notwithstanding subdivision (a), the father, mother, spouse, or other person liable for the support of the minor, the estate of that person, or the estate of the minor, shall not be liable for the costs of any of the legal services provided to any person described in this section if a petition to declare the minor a dependent child of the court pursuant to Section 300 is dismissed at or before the jurisdictional hearing.

(c) Fees received pursuant to this section shall be transmitted to the Administrative Office of the Courts in the same manner as prescribed in Section 68085.1 of the Government Code. The Administrative Office of the Courts shall deposit the fees received pursuant to this section into the Trial Court Trust Fund.

SEC. 2. Section 903.45 of the Welfare and Institutions Code is amended to read:

903.45. (a) The board of supervisors may designate a county financial evaluation officer pursuant to Section 27750 of the Government Code to make financial evaluations of liability for reimbursement pursuant to Sections 207.2, 903, 903.1, 903.2, 903.25, 903.3, and 903.5, and other reimbursable costs allowed by law, as set forth in this section.

(b) In any county where a board of supervisors has designated a county financial evaluation officer, the juvenile court shall, at the close of the disposition hearing, order any person liable for the cost of support, pursuant to Section 903, the cost of legal services as provided for in Section 903.1, probation costs as provided for in Section 903.2, or any other reimbursable costs allowed under this code, to appear before the county financial evaluation officer for a financial evaluation of his or her ability to pay those costs; and if the responsible person is not present at the disposition hearing, the court shall cite him or her to appear for such a financial evaluation. In the case of a parent, guardian, or other person assessed for the costs of transport, food, shelter, or care of a minor under Section 207.2 or 903.25, the juvenile court shall, upon request of the county probation department, order the appearance of the parent, guardian, or other person before the

county financial evaluation officer for a financial evaluation of his or her ability to pay the costs assessed.

If the county financial evaluation officer determines that a person so responsible has the ability to pay all or part of the costs, the county financial evaluation officer shall petition the court for an order requiring the person to pay that sum to the county or court, depending on which entity incurred the expense. If the parent or guardian is liable for costs for legal services pursuant to Section 903.1, the parent or guardian has been reunified with the child pursuant to a court order, and the county financial evaluation officer determines that repayment of the costs would harm the ability of the parent or guardian to support the child, then the county financial evaluation officer shall not petition the court for an order of repayment, and the court shall not make that order. In addition, if the parent or guardian is currently receiving reunification services, and the court finds that repayment by the parent or guardian will pose a barrier to reunification with the child because it will limit the ability of the parent or guardian to comply with the requirements of the reunification plan or compromise the parent's or guardian's current or future ability to meet the financial needs of the child, or in any case in which the court finds that the repayment would be unjust under the circumstances of the case, the court shall not order repayment by the parent or guardian. In evaluating a person's ability to pay under this section, the county financial evaluation officer and the court shall take into consideration the family's income, the necessary obligations of the family, and the number of persons dependent upon this income. Any person appearing for a financial evaluation shall have the right to dispute the county financial evaluation officer's determination, in which case he or she shall be entitled to a hearing before the juvenile court. The county financial evaluation officer at the time of the financial evaluation shall advise such a person of his or her right to a hearing and of his or her rights pursuant to subdivision (c).

At the hearing, any person so responsible for costs shall be entitled to have, but shall not be limited to, the opportunity to be heard in person, to present witnesses and other documentary evidence, to confront and cross-examine adverse witnesses, to disclosure of the evidence against him or her, and to receive a written statement of the findings of the court. The person shall have the right to be represented by counsel, and, when the person is unable to afford counsel, the right to appointed counsel. If the court determines that the person has the ability to pay all or part of the costs, including the costs of any counsel appointed to represent the person at the hearing, the court shall set the amount to be reimbursed and order him or her to pay that sum to the county or court, depending on which entity incurred the expense, in a manner in which the court believes reasonable and compatible with the person's financial ability.

If the person or persons, after having been ordered to appear before the county financial evaluation officer, have been given proper notice and fail to appear as ordered, the county financial evaluation officer shall recommend

to the court that he, she, or they be ordered to pay the full amount of the costs. Proper notice to him, her, or them shall contain all of the following:

(1) That he, she, or they have a right to a statement of the costs as soon as it is available.

(2) His, her, or their procedural rights under Section 27755 of the Government Code.

(3) The time limit within which his, her, or their appearance is required.

(4) A warning that if he, she, or they fail to appear before the county financial evaluation officer, the officer will recommend that the court order him, her, or them to pay the costs in full.

If the county financial evaluation officer determines that the person or persons have the ability to pay all or a portion of these costs, with or without terms, and he, she, or they concur in this determination and agree to the terms of payments, the county financial evaluation officer, upon his or her written evaluation and the person's or persons' written agreement, shall petition the court for an order requiring him, her, or them to pay that sum to the county or the court in a manner which is reasonable and compatible with his, her, or their financial ability. This order may be granted without further notice to the person or persons, provided a copy of the order is served on him, her, or them by mail.

However, if the county financial evaluation officer cannot reach an agreement with the person or persons with respect to either the liability for the costs, the amount of the costs, his, her, or their ability to pay the same, or the terms of payment, the matter shall be deemed in dispute and referred by the county financial evaluation officer back to the court for a hearing.

(c) At any time prior to the satisfaction of a judgment entered pursuant to this section, a person against whom the judgment was entered may petition the rendering court to modify or vacate the judgment on the basis of a change in circumstances relating to his or her ability to pay the judgment.

(d) Execution may be issued on the order in the same manner as on a judgment in a civil action, including any balance remaining unpaid at the termination of the court's jurisdiction over the minor.

SEC. 3. Section 903.47 is added to the Welfare and Institutions Code, to read:

903.47. (a) The Judicial Council shall establish a program to collect reimbursements from the person liable for the costs of counsel appointed to represent parents or minors pursuant to Section 903.1.

(1) As part of the program, the Judicial Council shall:

(A) Adopt a statewide standard for determining the ability to pay reimbursements for counsel, which shall at a minimum include the family's income, their necessary obligations, the number of individuals dependent on this income, and the cost-effectiveness of the program.

(B) Adopt policies and procedures allowing a court to recover from the money collected the costs associated with collecting delinquent reimbursements. The policies and procedures shall at a minimum limit the amount of money a court may recover to a reasonable proportion of the delinquent reimbursements collected and provide the terms and conditions

under which a court may use a third party to collect delinquent reimbursements.

(2) The money collected shall be deposited as required by Section 68085.1 of the Government Code. Except as otherwise authorized by law, the money collected under this program shall be utilized to reduce caseloads, for attorneys appointed by the court, to the caseload standard approved by the Judicial Council. Priority shall be given to those courts with the highest attorney caseloads that also demonstrate the ability to immediately improve outcomes for parents and children as a result of lower attorney caseloads.

(b) With the consent of the county and pursuant to the terms and conditions agreed upon by the court and county, the court may designate a financial evaluation officer to make financial evaluations of liability for reimbursement pursuant to Section 903.1. In processing reimbursement of payments pursuant to Section 903.1, the court and financial evaluation officer shall follow the procedures set forth for county financial evaluation officers in subdivisions (b), (c), and (d) of Section 903.45.